

Momentum Toward Peace Talks in Afghanistan?

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Developments in Afghanistan since February 2018, including a potential change in the U.S. stance toward direct talks with the Taliban, have increased the prospects for a negotiated end to the conflict there. In August 2017, [President Trump said](#), “Someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible to have a political settlement that includes elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but nobody knows if or when that will ever happen.” In the following months, American military operations intensified, with the number of U.S. troops in the country [rising](#) to about 15,000.

A [flurry](#) of recent [official visits](#) to the region signal a possible new emphasis on efforts to settle the war. [Many continue](#) to describe the conflict as stalemated. [Reports](#) that President Trump (who [acknowledged](#) that “my original instinct was to pull out”) “has expressed his frustration with the war and is desperate to see its end” are a commonly cited explanation for this new push. A grassroots Afghan initiative, which [originated](#) in March 2018 in the southern province of Helmand as a protest calling on both sides to lay down arms, spread [throughout the country](#) and culminated in a [march to Kabul](#) in June, [raising expectations](#) for peace talks.

Afghan Government Negotiations with the Taliban

For years, the United States and [many regional states](#) have maintained that the peace process must be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. In [June 2017](#), Afghan President Ashraf Ghani launched the Kabul Process, an Afghan-managed multilateral forum to secure international support for peace in Afghanistan; the Taliban, who reject the legitimacy of the Kabul government, have not participated. At the second meeting of the Kabul Process in February 2018, [Ghani made a peace offer](#) to the Taliban that included recognition of the group as a political party and direct negotiations without preconditions in what was seen as an “[unprecedented](#)” development. The Taliban never responded to the offer directly, and [announced](#) their annual “spring offensive” in April 2018.

U.S. officials, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, maintain that “there are elements of the Taliban clearly interested in talking to the Afghan government.” However, outside analysts, [citing interviews](#) with Taliban fighters, report that the group’s members “think that ousting foreign troops by force is the most realistic strategy” and that “the Taliban rank and file are not enthusiastic about peace talks.” In May 2018, [General Nicholson said](#) that “a lot of the diplomatic activity and dialogue is

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occurring off the stage ... at multiple levels. So you see mid-level, senior-level Taliban leaders engaging with Afghans.” The Taliban have denied any such talks.

June 2018 Cease-fire

On June 7, 2018, President Ghani announced a unilateral, week-long nationwide cease-fire with the Taliban coinciding with the end of Ramadan (June 11-20). No cease-fire had previously been put into practice. Two days later, the Taliban responded with a three-day cease-fire (June 16-18) that overlapped with the government’s, although a Taliban spokesman denied any link between the two. U.S. forces also halted offensive operations against the Taliban. During the cease-fire, Afghan media was awash in images of Taliban members and Afghan forces embracing as fighters from the two sides mingled and visited areas controlled by the other.

On June 16, the Afghan government unilaterally extended the cease-fire by another 10 days (through June 30), but the Taliban rejected the offer. Despite its relatively short duration, some have characterized the cease-fire as a watershed that demonstrated “popular pressure and support for peace,” and a moment “politically and militarily dangerous to any party wanting to prolong the conflict.” However, President Ghani’s offer of a second, conditional cease-fire on August 20 was effectively rejected by the Taliban, which has since overrun a strategic provincial capital and is inflicting a rising number of casualties on Afghan forces.

Direct U.S.-Taliban Talks?

While the official U.S. position has been that “the United States will support direct negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban when both sides commit to them,” the Taliban has for years maintained that it will negotiate only with the United States, dismissing the Kabul government as weak and illegitimate. U.S. diplomats participated in sporadic, informal talks directly with Taliban figures from 2010 to 2012, then engaged indirectly, through Qatari mediation, largely on the issue of a prisoner exchange which took place in May 2014.

In July 2018, the *New York Times* reported that “the Trump Administration has told its top diplomats to seek direct talks with the Taliban” in a potentially significant change in U.S. policy. There have since been two reported meetings between U.S. officials and Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, led by Principal Deputy Assistance Secretary of State Alice Wells in July and newly appointed Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in October. These meetings have not been officially confirmed by the United States.

Some Afghan officials oppose the prospect of direct U.S.-Taliban talks. In a recent interview, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker said, “We absolutely should not be doing anything independent of the Afghan government.” Analysts and others who support talks argue that the Taliban might “accept some American presence” in Afghanistan, especially as it relates to the Islamic State, with which both the United States and the Taliban have clashed. Former U.S. officials who met with Taliban representatives earlier this year reported that their Taliban interlocutors said the group could accept an international military presence “if an inclusive government, after a political settlement occurs in Afghanistan, wants international forces to be in the country to train Afghan security forces ... because they’ll have participated in that decision.”

Upcoming political developments in Afghanistan, including already controversial parliamentary elections set for October and a potentially divisive presidential race next year, could impact these dynamics by altering the composition of the Afghan government and, in turn, changing how motivated Afghan officials are to pursue negotiations with the Taliban and how Taliban figures view their interlocutors in Kabul.

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